

by Peter Stone Brown

One of first things “No Direction Home” hits you with is the bleak vast whiteout nothingness of a Minnesota blizzard and it seems like time stops and it seems like the film stops and at first you’re not even sure what it is and you have to stop and think about that, and then it moves back and forth in time to on-stage madness and back to this ’50s town in the middle of the bleak whiteout nowhere. And then in the shadows you see him much older talking about the sounds the radio brought in late at night from far away and perfect -- you see some kid sleeping next to a blasting radio and I had to stop think how some people now barely know what a radio is or what it did. And I think back to how late at night, long after I was supposed to be at sleep I’d lie in bed, the radio right behind me, turned down real low, twisting that dial real real slow to try and get those sounds in from far away, which wasn’t all that easy because I was living on the outskirts of the radio capital of America, which had hundreds of stations of its own, but late at night you could tune in Louisville Kentucky. Windsor Ontario and sometimes Nashville, but it was a different world then.

And then some of the guys who were coming in on the radio, Hank Williams, Webb Pierce, Gene Vincent, Johnny Ray take the screen, and it doesn’t matter who they did or didn’t show. And the guy in the shadows comes back to say just what those sounds on the radio in the night did to him, did for him and even now he can’t really explain it, but it’s written in the lines of his face and it’s there in the centuries of his eyes.

And slowly it builds to reveal someone who was always ready to move on, lest anyone catch up with him, yet for someone who never wanted to look back, when he does look back on his first girlfriends, the camera provides a priceless moment when he says, “Those girls brought out the poet in me,” and he is on the verge of cracking into hysterical laughter and trying his best not to, and for anyone looking for something to be revealed, it’s all right there in those few seconds.

And so the film leaves Hibbing, moving briefly to Minneapolis, perhaps the place where he truly found his destiny and all this time there are flash forwards and the cast of characters slowly emerges, all people who were there, people who took part, people who knew him, people he knew and people who were aware.

One of the best surprises is Paul Nelson, cofounder of “The Little Sandy Review,” a tiny alternative to “Sing Out!” magazine, who later became managing editor of “Sing Out,” and his chronicle of what went down at Newport in 1965 is the one I’ve always referred to, the one

I've kept and perhaps that one article did more to enhance what went on that night than anything else that came after. And some of the stories Nelson tells show this is no mere puff piece.

But more important Minneapolis was where Dylan first truly immersed himself in folk music and Woody Guthrie; Dylan really talks about how Guthrie affected him, how his songs "could show you how to live," and luckily we are treated to film clips of Guthrie, and film clips of Odetta singing a field holler, "Water Boy" and playing a massive guitar and Dylan talks about how her rhythm showed him a whole other way of playing and along the way more characters such as Tony Glover are brought into the picture. Glover was a great harp player and member of the incredible blues trio Koerner, Ray & Glover. And Koerner, Ray and Glover, were deep, deep into the blues and their playing backed it up. Few came as close as they did, and they never got either the recognition or the money they deserved, but there's a whole lot of people who found about Blind Willie McTell, or Big Joe Williams or Sleepy John Estes because of those guys.

And then the film moves to New York and Greenwich Village and not only the folk music scene, but the beat scene. And the film through brilliant use of old film clips and photographs interspersed with memories of a whole new group of characters captures it, what people looked like, what buildings looked like and from those scenes the feel of what it was like. Liam Clancy, brilliant in a bar with a half mug of beer, letting the actor in him come out, as he lets you in on how incredible thing it must have been to watch Dylan grow and change, and how he was so many things at once and always moving, always changing, and how Dylan wouldn't let him alone, but there's no doubt at all how much he truly loves, respects and is amazed by him and when he speaks the word poet, or the word comic, or talks about Dylan Thomas or Chaplin, or the word writer it's done with reverence: that a poem is a sacred thing, that art is a sacred thing, something of wonder to be cherished. And some may wonder why is this Irish guy in this movie? Perhaps along with providing a non-American view not only of Dylan, but of America and Greenwich Village, it just might be that Bob Dylan got a whole bunch of his best melodies from songs that Liam Clancy sang.

And then there's Dave Van Ronk, intellectual ragtime, bluesman, who applied jazz to guitar and came up with something different. Astute, brilliant, in his own life extremely political, never taking part in the songs for politics movement or whatever it was, though he befriended most who did. And even though Dylan took from him in a way that would make some people furious for life, to his credit -- and he deserves as much credit as anyone deserves -- he's able to see the

humor in it, that in the end it's comedic drama in the grand play of life.

And then Izzy Young, sometimes gruff, totally New York, proprietor of the Folklore Center, a store that was as much of a way of life as anything, that barely broke even all of its existence, but was Mecca for anyone interested in folk music. And you could go in there and spend hours just looking at stuff, and if you went in often enough he'd talk to you and if he got to know who you were, he'd really talk to you. Besides from not really making a living at the Folklore Center, Izzy presented concerts, usually in churches, and wrote what was essentially the gossip column for "Sing Out! magazine," "Frets and Frails," where he'd make no bones about putting Dylan down at times. But when he says: 'it was worth it, the guy wrote great songs', it gives where he's coming from a whole other perspective.

While all these interviews are happening interspersed at times with Dylan's own comments on the scene and of course music, the film flashes forward to glimpses of England, 1966, sometimes for a second, sometimes more. But more and more people are introduced. John Cohen, musician, photographer, filmmaker, perceptive, honest, you wish he'd talk for hours. Bruce Langhorne, guitarist for a many different people, Odetta, the Clancy Brothers, on the scene seemingly forever, his eyes lighting up as he describes the Bringing It All Back Home sessions, the fun, the freedom, the only person in the film to give Albert Grossman credit.

Suze Rotolo opening up another window, gently, on what what those times were like and then Joan Baez, and great is the only word to describe her in this interview. And while some of the stories told here, she's written about or talked about, it's a whole other thing watching her tell it, because as painful and hard as it might be, she is able to see past that and to see her tell about Dylan writing in her house and asking what she thought is incredible.

Also not to be discounted is Mark Spoelstra, in fact the only other person in the film who was part of the so-called topical song movement, to also have his songs published by Broadside and to be on the Broadside Vol. 1 album along with Blind Boy Grunt. Spoelstra was one of the most talented and also one of the least known of that whole group of people. A great 12-string player and a strong soulful singer, as well as a poetic writer, his career was pretty much derailed because he was a conscientious objector during the mid-'60s. While he had already recorded two albums for Folkways, he managed a breakthrough album 5 and 20 Questions (with liner notes by Richard Farina) on Elektra in 1965, but because he was in alternative service,

he wasn't able to tour to promote it and though he issued a few other recordings later on including some on Columbia, his career never really blossomed.

There is also Allen Ginsberg, describing how he wept when he first heard "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," because he realized that the torch had been passed, and the memory almost breaks him up again. But it's not only the people, but how the interviews are used to build up to a picture of not only what the times were like but how they felt.

And throughout all this Dylan is constantly soaking everything in, constantly moving, realizing when his first album is finally released that he's way past it, and suddenly writing, turning out song after song, anywhere he can and not even sure why,

And then things start moving real fast, and at the Newport Folk Festival for all intents and purposes he was crowned if not the king, the new young prince, the spokesman of the spokesmen and a month later he's singing for thousands at the March on Washington and you have to remember that most people there or watching it on television had no idea who he was.

A little over two months later the president is shot. A week later I saw Dylan for the first time in concert. The theater was nowhere close to being full and probably many of those attending took the short train ride from New York City to Newark, New Jersey.

A few weeks after that, he was given the Tom Paine award, and I remember hearing about that from people that I knew long before I read about it, and at the same time the press, the big magazines, "Newsweek," "Time," "Life" with "Newsweek" being the most damaging had already started their assault. And while the movie doesn't go into this, the gist of the assault was along with things like dirty, punctuates his words with obscenities, photos with captions such as "bearded bodyguards," and ultimately: really a Jew from Minnesota.

The point is however that he'd only had the crown of the new folk messiah, the new Woody Guthrie for less than five months, and was giving it up, though his third album, the one that in a sense was the most overtly political wasn't even released yet, though its final track provided a clue that he'd already moved on.

At this point enters Bob Neuwirth, who would be for all intents and purposes the backstage ringmaster of the Bob Dylan circus. And while "It's Alright Ma" plays in the background he points out that

nothing like this had ever been written before, and he's right. And he also points out that at that time, none of the people doing things that are shown in this movie, whether writing songs, playing music or making movies were doing it to make money. They were doing it to do it, they were doing it to say something, doing it because they had to do it. And then as if to qualify it all, he points out that the size of the concerts Dylan was playing wasn't all that huge. "Twelve-hundred people" he says, there's probably that many people right now waiting for the D train at Sheridan Square."

And then, there is Al Kooper telling once again the story of the "Like A Rolling Stone" session and even though he's told this story dozens of times, he remains charming and funny, giving a hysterical imitation of producer Tom Wilson. Along with that is a great story from Tony Glover on how "It Takes A Lot To Laugh" reached final arrangement and this is in tandem with footage of producer Bob Johnston in which he shows he attended the Sam Phillips school for crazed southern record producers.

And so it keeps building, first to Newport '65, then to Forest Hills, and if there's questions about booing at Newport, there's no questions about Forest Hills, it's all in Paul Nelson's eyes when he talks about it being scary. I was at that show, and it's a miracle that a riot didn't break out that night. That's how intense it was.

Throughout it all, the film keeps fast-forwarding to 1966, Dylan onstage with marvelous footage of solo acoustic renditions of "Mr. Tambourine Man," and "Visions of Johanna" shown for the first time. But each time it goes forward it gets a little more intense and a little scarier whether onstage or off.

As it goes on the press conferences and interviews grown more and more absurd, with Dylan at first playful and funny and at the end plain exhausted, and the questions asked more bizarre, from the very strange person at the San Francisco press conference asking about the Highway 61 Revisited album cover to reporters who had never heard a song, let alone an album, had no clue at all who they were talking to and were probably fed questions by an editor or in some cases a TV producer. It's easy to see why Dylan treated the press like he did, not to mention the fans.

And through it all, there are magnificent performances and yes, they're not complete. But so what? It's not a concert film, it's a filmography of a certain period. And the performances say it all, just the growth and the change of his onstage presence is amazing as he grows from a sometimes comical bumbler, to a performer dead-sure of

what he's doing to the frenetic maniac with megaphone hands on "Leopard Skin Pillbox Hat."

What this live footage also does whether it wants to or not is chronicle the loss of innocence. The guy who could giggle back one-liners while moving with the grace of a manic Chaplin has turned into some dour stoned marionette taunting, daring the audience. "This is a folk song," he sneers to one English crowd. At as it gets closer to the end you see how exhausted he is, strung out on speed and god knows what else, and the impact is devastating because it hits you how close he was to not being. And hitting even harder is that the insanity and the absurdity of the whole situation, this constant furor appears to be ultimately about playing with a band. And Dylan is generous towards that band in the interview, "They were gallant, like knights, sticking with me through all that. I have to give them credit."

Sometime back in the early '70s in some crazy store that sold all kinds of things from records and books to hash pipes and t-shirts, I came across this sort of huge book/magazine titled "Praxis One, Existence Men and Realities," with a cover photo of Bob Dylan in Israel wearing a yarmulke. I bought it immediately of course. In an article on "John Wesley Harding," was an illustration, a kind of cartoon illustration of drawings taken from photographs. The first was Dylan playing an electric guitar in the studio, the next was the suited Dylan with shades, playing the electric with surrounded by a halo of light. The next was the same picture except it was a skeleton playing a guitar of fire. The final panel was the John Wesley Harding picture with an acoustic guitar drawn in at his side. The last few scenes of "No Direction Home" reminded me of that drawing.

"No Direction Home" is a near perfect depiction of a period of time, what it meant and a man who was and shall remain one of the most important figures of that time, and for those who know one of the most important figures of music period. As Dave Van Ronk says in the film, "If you believe in a collective American unconsciousness, Bobby tapped into it," or as Joan Baez says, "If you go along for the ride, he goes way deep."

What Martin Scorsese has done is by taking old footage from a variety of sources, photographs and people's recollections, is tell a cohesive story designed for maximum impact. And he did it brilliantly. There are little things one can quibble over, a '64 photo in a '63 sequence, this song or that album not being mentioned, one part of a story over another. For the most part such complaints are minor. As Bob Dylan once said describing how he figures out what songs he's going to perform, "It's not so much what to put n, but what to leave out." And

yes some people and some stories are left out. But there's a million things to realize while watching this and while thinking about it afterwards. One is that the majority of people interviewed for this movie all had very good reasons to be totally damning but instead they all were generous.

And as for the interview with Dylan himself, well he's as sly as ever, but he does let out some things and some things you have to be on the ball to catch. Sometimes it's just in the way he phases something, at other times, it's how he tries (often failing) to hide a smile and sometimes it's in what he doesn't say.

And of course the gimme crowd will complain about the songs, and how they're cut or how they're used, and they'll want more and more and more, but it's not a concert film. But if you want to know how it felt, then No Direction Home will certainly point the way.